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AUTHOR Grubb, W. Norton
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of inspections in England's schools. The paper describes four approaches to inspection: inspection in the pre-1993 days; the current inspection system in elementary-secondary education; inspections initiated by the schools themselves; and inspection in further-education colleges, which are similar to community colleges in the United States. Inspection began in England in 1839 and relied on classroom observation instead of questionnaires. Teachers viewed the system as beneficial, a sentiment that changed when inspections were altered in 1993. The bulk of the paper describes this change and the creation of the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), which codified evaluation criteria. An overview of the conduct of inspection with OFSTED, the truncation of information and expertise, the effects of inspection, the focus of inspection, and the inspection teams and its members' role strain are described. The tension with OFSTED led many schools to create individual inspection systems, which are briefly described. Further-education colleges also evolved a different kind of inspection system, one that values feedback for instructors. The text concludes with suggestions for implementing inspections in the United States. (RJM)

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OPENING CLASSROOMS AND IMPROVING SCHOOLS:

LESSONS FROM INSPECTION SYSTEMS IN ENGLAND

W. Norton Grubb
School of Education
University of California, Berkeley

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OPENING CLASSROOMS AND IMPROVING SCHOOLS: LESSONS FROM INSPECTION SYSTEMS IN ENGLAND

W. Norton Grubb

The classroom is normally a secret space. Even though it is full of people, what goes on is rarely reported, and even less often used to discuss what teaching is and might be. As generations of reformers have lamented, anything can happen when the teacher closes the door — and so the best-considered changes, the most carefully-constructed reforms may be undone when teachers revert to old and familiar practices. And the price of privacy falls on teachers too, as their lifework is so rarely discussed and their own perspectives ignored in public debate. The improvement is teaching is not a routine element of American schools and colleges: it is, sometimes and fitfully, the subject of reform efforts punctuating business as usual, but it is not the stuff of daily conversation in most schools.

Yet this need not be the case. In Great Britain, whose schools and reform efforts share many similarities with our own, mechanisms of inspection — in which teams of outside inspectors observe classrooms and other dimensions of schools and report on the quality of teaching — have been around for almost 150 years. In many ways they have succeeded in opening up the classroom, in converting teaching from a hidden activity to one about which more public discussions take place, and where different approaches and possible improvements become more routine conversations. When inspections work well — and there are many cases where they are widely praised by teachers and administrators alike — they serve as vehicles for a broad and continuous conversation about teaching, providing ideas for teachers and fostering expertise about instruction that is located in teachers, in administrators who participate in the inspection process, and in

inspectors themselves. This is teacher training writ much larger than the episodic staff development days and summer workshops that pass for teacher improvement in the U.S.

But, like any assessment mechanism, inspection can be used as a regulatory device as well as a mechanism of discussion and improvement. As it has been implemented since 1993, inspection in elementary and secondary schools has become stressful and punitive. Its benefits, only grudgingly admitted by teachers and administrators, are hardly worth the costs, and the conversation about teaching it has engendered is limited and awkward, constrained rather than facilitated by the specific form it has taken. An important story of English inspection[1] is how a system, so fondly remembered from the olden days before 1993, has been so quickly transformed into a widely-detested mechanism that teachers view as a mechanism of Conservative control over education.

And that's part of my point: Inspection isn't a single system, but a multitude of approaches to classroom observation. It can therefore be modified to fit different types of institutions, and different perceptions of what schools and colleges need; the practices that create so much controversy and resistance in elementary-secondary schools in England can readily be modified. In this essay I will describe four approaches to inspection[2]: inspection in the pre-1993 days (Section I); the current inspection system in elementary-secondary education (Section II); inspections initiated by schools themselves (Section III); and inspection in further education (FE) colleges, remarkably similar to our community colleges (Section IV). I'll spend the most time on current inspection in elementary-secondary education, because

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[1] While inspection takes places in Wales and Scotland as well as England, the Scots have considerably modified inspection, as they do with many educational policies. While Wales normally follows England quite closely, its schools often depart from English practices in small ways, and I did not carry out any observations or interviews in Welch schools. Therefore this essay describes practices only in England.

[2] There are clearly many more than four. A more thorough review would also examine the Scottish system, which is quite different from the English system. In addition, there are inspection mechanisms in other countries, like one in British Columbia with both an internal and an external assessment that is said to be more supportive than the English model. New South Wales (Australia) also has a multi-method approach too school quality that includes classroom observations (Cuttance, 1995).

this has been the most controversial and the best-researched kind of inspection, and because it clarifies a broad range of issues better than any other.

As Americans grapple with ways of improving schools, some method of observing classrooms would be valuable and complementary to other methods of reforming schools. When inspection works well, the benefits are enormous — to teachers, to students, to schools with a sense of common purpose. But inspection is also fragile, since it can be politicized and shaped to fit a particular agenda — in the case of Great Britain, the Tories' conservative educational agenda. When I consider in the final section how inspection might be adopted in this country, the task is to isolate those elements that have been supportive of teachers and conducive to broad discussions about instruction from those that have worked simply by scaring teachers to death.

I. Inspection Before 1993: The Model of Connoisseurship

Inspection began in 1839, soon after the initial government funding to support schools for the poor. As it evolved, a group of Her (or His) Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) conducted periodic observations of schools for the purpose of determining whether public money was well spent, and whether the central office of education could help schools improve.[3] The principle of observation by external examiners was therefore established early in the British educational system, and the inspection process was always one in which classroom observations were central — not interviews, not questionnaires, not the measurement of classrooms or teachers, or books or other resources, not consultations with parents or students, but direct observation of the classroom by experts with long experience in the classroom. In addition, the dual and possibly conflicting roles of inspection — as a mechanisms of accountability and a process of school improvement — were part of inspection from

[3] On the pre-1993 system of inspections see Wilson (1996), whose visits took place in late 1992 and early 1993, just before the enormous transformations of 1993.

the start. The longevity of this process helps explain the widespread acceptance of some form of inspection: Virtually all English educators accept the idea that educational quality requires both professional development and external assessment of some kind, in contrast to the U.S. where the sanctity of the classroom is often a creed to live and die by.

As inspection developed, a cadre of HMIs carried out periodic inspections of schools, but these were rare (unless a school was failing) and unsystematic. Prior to 1993 there were about 500 HMIs, in a country of about 25,000 schools, and so it's not surprisingly that inspections were infrequent, occurring perhaps once every ten years or so. However, among those individuals who wen through an HMI inspection, HMIs themselves are almost universally remembered as wise and helpful individuals; they were men (almost always) of great experience in the classroom, of quiet and thoughtful temperament, who could come into a classroom and understand quickly what was going on. Their expertise was that of practitioners, not that of the researcher or evaluator, and they are remembered as both understanding teaching and able to help teachers in ways that others cannot. A common comment was that "they saw everything", or "you couldn't fool an HMI". An HMI inspection was "tough", one teacher mentioned, but the compensation was that they provided detailed advice about how to improve teaching. HMIs often set up continuing relationships with schools and would visit periodically, provide advice about specific problems, and generally be available for consultation. The Inspectorate also published "red books" for specific areas of the curriculum, entitled *Curriculum Matters*, detailing various elements of good practice in specific subjected, so that their accumulated expertise was compiled in a particular way and made available to others.

Prior to 1993, there were no published principles or guidelines for schools to follow. Because the basis for inspections was unmodified and based on the experience and wisdom of HMIs, it is widely described as a model of

"connoisseurship" — of individuals with a certain sense of what teaching should be. The process of selecting HMIs and the training process including a two-year apprenticeship with a senior HMI may have contributed to a certain uniformity in their tastes; there are few complaints about inconsistencies in the pre-1993 inspection process. However, even though inspection prior to 1993 is widely viewed as improving the quality of education, it didn't have a consistent influence. It was, as one administrator mentioned, "a great vision but with no management", too infrequent and unsystematic to have affected all schools.

In addition to HMI inspections, local education authorities (LEAs) also carried out inspections of schools within their purview (Hargreaves, 1990). This process had the advantage that the institution carrying out inspections would also have the responsibility for "picking up the pieces" and improving the schools found wanting. These inspections varied enormously, and some paid less attention to classroom observation than to other ways of gathering information and providing staff development; as one ex-inspector mentioned, "We were making it up as we went along". But together with HMI efforts, LEA inspections contributed to a system where classroom observations were a routine and accepted part of school improvement.

II. Elementary-Secondary Inspection: The Reign of OFSTED

The process of inspection in elementary-secondary education was markedly changed by the Education (Schools) Act of 1992.[4] Inspection was reconstituted principally to enforce the National Curriculum[5], and its role in providing advice for school improvement was abandoned, at least formally. As a mechanism of enforcement, it was important for inspection to be more regular than it was in the days of connoisseurship; therefore a schedule was established where every school would be inspected once every four years. (The schedule for inspections has slipped, not surprisingly, and the first cycle is likely to be completed in six rather than four years.) Rather than expend the staff of HMIs, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) was created; it carries out its work by contracting inspections to teams that bid to perform clusters of inspections in areas of their expertise — secondary schools, for example, or nursery schools. Teams are led by a Registered Inspector (or "Reggie"), with legal responsibility for the inspection.[6] The teams also include individuals with expertise in every area covered by the National Curriculum — the conventional academic subjects like math and English, various performing arts, technology, religious studies — as well as a lay inspector with no professional

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[4] The most comprehensive research on post-1993 inspection is that of Gray and Wilcox (1996); see also the special issue of the *Cambridge Review of Education*, Vol. 25(1), 1995, "Inspection at the Crossroads: Time for Review?); and the articles in the *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 45(1), March 1997. The *Times Educational Supplement* is also a wonderful source of information about the fray over inspection, particularly the frequent acid contributions by E.C. (Tedd) Wragg; see also Wragg and Brighouse, 1995). My information on elementary-secondary inspection also includes observations in two schools undergoing inspection, in one of which I was the guest of the inspection team and attended all team meetings; interviews in two schools that had recently undergone inspection; and interviews with other heads, former HMIs, researchers, and OFSTED personnel. The schools I visited and the individuals I interviewed were all secondary schools; my conclusions may therefore be less pertinent to elementary, nursery, and special schools. My research is therefore not as comprehensive as that of Gray and Wilcox; on the other hand, the major dimensions of opinion are widely shared.

[5] The National Curriculum provides extensive guidelines for all schools up through the sixth form (corresponding roughly to twelfth grade), when those students still in school take A-level exams for admission to University. It can be described as a much more thorough version of the frameworks or curriculum guidelines that states in the U.S. are currently trying.

[6] Legally Reggies bear the responsibility for the results of inspection so that they, not OFSTED, can be sued for malfeasance; the teams and Reggies therefore bear all the risk but none of the responsibility for the way inspection is structured.

expertise in schools, to provide a different perspective than educators themselves might have. Teams are selected based on quality and cost, at least in theory. In practice OFSTED appears to evaluate whether team members have sufficient experience, and as long as the quality of team appears adequate OFSTED appears to choose on the basis of cost since it has neither the information nor the resources to make more detailed judgements about quality — at least this is the prevailing opinion, among team members themselves as well as teachers and administrators. This contracting process and the squeeze on costs proves to be one of many factors influencing the information available from inspections, as we shall see; as one school head noted. "it's necessarily a cut-rate production", compared to prior HMI inspections.

Because inspection now had a specific purpose — the enforcement of the National Curriculum — the old "connoisseurship" model was inappropriate. OFSTED therefore codified the criteria for evaluating schools in a series of volumes — e.g., *Guidance on the Inspection of Secondary Schools* (OFSTED, 1995) — which provides guidelines for the inspection process itself as well as the requirements for inspection. Inspectors are required to report on the quality of education; the educational standards achieved; whether the financial resources available to the school are managed efficiently; and the "spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of pupils" at each school. Most teachers and administrators find these Guidelines helpful, particularly compared to the complete absence of guidelines in the pre-1993 era. They may be a little bland, some have commented — they certainly do not establish what truly inspired teaching might look like, and they forego endorsing any particular approach to teaching. But as statements of unexceptionable elements of good teaching, they strike most teachers and administrators (and me too, for what that's worth) as solid, judicious, and generally helpful. These Guidelines have been widely used in schools conducting their own inspections (see section III), even those that see OFSTED inspections as destructive. Thus the very

process of establishing a framework for inspections has its own educational value, in the effort to distill what observers should look for.

The Guidelines developed by OFSTED also include prescriptions for school inspections themselves. The importance of the current process is that the majority of time is spent observing classrooms — not, as is typical in accreditation visits in the U.S., in interviewing administrators or counting resources; by OFSTED regulation, 60 percent of inspectors' time should be spent observing classrooms, sampling students' work, and talking with students. Inspectors are supposed to observe each teacher at least once, and they sometimes visit two or three times, particularly if a particular subject area or teacher appears to be weak. In addition, the inspection process gathers a great deal of other information: schools complete forms providing information about enrollments, student backgrounds, classes offered, and the like (the pre-inspection school context and indicator report, or PICSI); the results of national exams are available; inspectors interview groups of parents, students, and governors (i.e., school board members). Parents are notified about the inspection and invited to submit comments or to speak with inspectors. Thus the inspection process is designed to elicit as much information as possible.

Furthermore, there are elaborate procedures for recording this volume of information. Every class observed is recorded on a sheet that requires a scores of one (excellent) to seven (very poor) on teaching, student response, attainment, and progress, with a paragraph of support required for each score; other forms are completed for interviews with administrators, parents, and governors; and still other forms are completed for observations of non-class activities like assemblies, playgrounds, cafeterias, conduct while passing among classes, physical facilities, and the like. Indeed, the process of conducting an inspection is partly a paperwork blizzard, with forms accumulating as the week progresses; offhand comments about observations are likely to be met with the response that "we need a sheet for that, for OFSTED". During the inspection week, around Thursday afternoon, the inspection

team summarizes its results in "star charts", with numbers (the ever-present 7-point Likert scale) for each department on a number of dimensions; the "star chart" is then summarized to the school administrators verbally and translated into writing for a public report. (The numbers on the "star chart" are never given directly to the school, though they are fed into the OFSTED maw as part of its large data base.) So there is a concerted effort to record the information from inspections — though, as I will argue below, the procedure is still one in which a great deal of information — and the most crucial information at that — is lost.

Once the inspection is over, the results are written up and presented to the school; administrators can challenge reports on factual grounds, though this appears to be difficult because the underlying "facts" have been generated by the inspection team itself.[7] Then a final report is published, for all to see — parents, prospective parents, governors, and taxpayers. These reports don't make exciting reading to outsiders because they are written in a peculiar language — "OFSTED-speak", described below — and because they have boiled down a vast amount of observation into brief sentences. For example, one school's report included the criticisms that "ineffective use is made of teachers' training and experience", and "the quality of teaching is poorly targeted in years 7 to 9"; while such comments are based on more specific observations, it's hard to know how schools can respond to such generalizations. Schools prepare a plan to respond to criticisms in these results, though the implementation of such plans is left to the schools themselves (and their governors). In the case of failing schools, however, OFSTED may conduct periodic re-inspections, and schools that fail to make progress may be taken over by the Secretary of State.

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[7] Very recently OFSTED has announced that it will create a process by which schools can submit their claims of unfair inspections to an independent arbitrator; see Gardiner (1998). But since OFSTED itself has adjudicated complaints up until now, there is a general feeling that schools have been reluctant to complain about inspections because "they realize nothing will happen if they do make a complaint", according to an official with the National Association of Head Teachers.

The procedures devised by OFSTED are, in many ways, substantial improvements over the casual pre-1993 procedures. All schools are inspected, on regular basis; the basis for inspection is clarified in the various *Guidelines;* the conduct of the inspection itself is standardized, so that differences from team to team are minimized; the information from the inspection is carefully collected; and there are mechanisms for using this information to improve the quality of schools, completing the circle. From my perspective, the crucial dimension is that classroom observations form the heart of the inspection process. And so inspection opens up the classroom: teaching is made visible, the subject of discussion and then improvement.

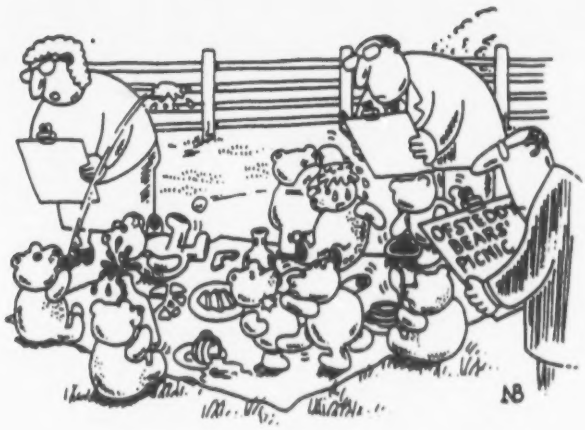
But, as in so many areas of education, God is in the details. What happens in practice is powerfully influenced by the specifics of an inspection, the context surrounding the inspection, the way information is conveyed. These details, so different in the inspections schools have created for themselves and in FE colleges, shape the value of inspections for good and evil.

The Conduct of an Inspection

The dominant characteristic of an inspection is that it is enormously stressful for all involved. Schools know at least a year in advance that they will be inspected, and they typically begin an extensive process of preparing for the inspection — not, as one might imagine, by scripting lessons for the inspection week but by completing the enormous amount of paperwork required by the National Curriculum, particular the preparation of schemes of work (lesson plans) for each lesson, since inspectors may ask for any of these plans during their visit. Teachers are somewhat divided about the value of this kind of preparation: some commented that "it keeps you sharp", or "it makes you do what you should have done", but a majority bitterly

resent it because the paperwork is carried out to fit OFSTED's purposes, not for the benefit of students. In addition, many schools bring in outsiders to provide specific help, or conduct mock inspections during the months preceding the inspection itself. This period is unanimously described as one of enormous time pressures, with teachers working nights and weekends for many months. This starts to build stress; as one teacher mentioned, "I don't like the way it's done: I had eight months of hell". Apparently some people crack: the head teacher of one school I visited resigned during this period, and there are many stories of teachers taking health-related leaves or falling sick just prior to inspection week. How many of these stories are true is impossible to determine, but the lore and legend of inspection conveys the stress that surrounds the process.

Then comes the inspection week itself. The inspectors — perhaps 12 to 15 for a secondary school of 1,500 - 2,000 students — are given free reign. They enter classes at will — preventing teachers from scripting particular lessons. Often, teachers prepare little slips of paper or pages describing the intent of the class, to provide the inspector some context — since an inspector typically visits a class for 20 minutes or so before moving on, perhaps coming back to a particularly teacher for one or two other segments (particularly for teachers who appear weak). Teachers are under pressure the entire week, therefore, and there's the sense of constantly looking over one's shoulder to see whether an inspector is entering the classroom — the "OFSTED twitch", as one teacher described the vigilance for a turning doorknob. Inspectors also observe playgrounds, assemblies, lunchrooms, hallways, and every other space, always with clipboards, always filling out OFSTED sheets with 7- point Likert scales.



The cartoon reproduced from *Private Eye*, with inspectors filling out charts at the OFSTEDdy bears' picnic, accurately conveys the sense of inspectors snooping everywhere.

When inspectors visit a class, they typically sit in a corner filling out the required forms; they may also chat with students quietly, though most students seem indifferent to them (as to all visitors) and don't appear to be overly prepped. There's substantial variation in what inspectors say to teachers, however: many, under the pressure of time, simply leave for the next class without a word, while others will take some time — 5 to 10 minutes at most — to comment on what they saw, what improvements are possible, what practice in other schools look like. Inspection teams vary in their philosophies about providing advice; such Reggies encourage this feedback, others discourage it. Teachers overwhelming value this kind of information and the opportunity for discussion with inspectors; it reminds them of the pre-1993 process, where advice was the central purpose. But OFSTED itself has discouraged this kind of advice, portraying the inspection process as a form of monitoring rather than advisement; and the pressure of time makes such advice fleeting at best.

Despite the attention to classroom observation in the inspection process, the observation turns out to be artificial in several ways. The 20-minutes segments are too short; teachers complain that these "snapshots" don't allow inspectors to see a full lesson, never mind the development over a year. Teachers and administrators

note that inspectors behave according to the motto "If we didn't see it, it didn't happen"; it's therefore difficult to convey to inspectors where a particular class stands in a semester's teaching.[8] Because inspectors will be there for such a short period of time, teachers often feel that they must teach to the plan, not "on the hoof"; "teachable moments" and other spontaneous possibilities have to be ignored in favor of presenting a "typical" lesson. A representative comment is "Your focus is OFSTED, not the students"; another noted: "It's strange — you have to pack a whole year into a week."

In addition, many teachers resent being observed *without* the opportunity to talk with inspectors because it means they are unable to put the lesson in context, to explain how it fits into the year's progress, to interpret the difficulties of particular students. As one noted, "When someone has been in your lesson, you want to know what went right or wrong. You want to know because I know if it's Jimmy [who responded inadequately], I understand that; if I've yelled at a student in a particular way, [there may be a reason]." Implicitly, teachers are asking for a discussion around teaching, but the inspection process in elementary/secondary education is not a discussion; as one head noted, it's an asymmetric process in which OFSTED and its inspectors have all the power, in which suggestions to teachers are not formally allowed and praise is hard to give (even though some inspectors provide feedback on the fly), in which teacher corrections of inspectors' perceptions are almost impossible to make.

Finally, teachers widely perceive inspection as a process where OFSTED and its minions are looking for bad teaching, in order to root out the incompetents — rather than a process of trying to improve the quality of teaching overall. The director of OFSTED, Chris Woodhead, has single-handedly done considerable damage to the process: his public presentations are consistently demeaning to

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[8] The practice of reporting only what inspectors observe leads to another kind of story about inspectors. One such tale involved a school with a culminating ceremony on the Friday before inspection week, but the Reggie wouldn't attend because it didn't fall within the specified week.

teachers and other educationists and mention repeatedly the large numbers of incompetent teachers. Recently OFSTED devised a process for identifying failing teachers — those with overall scores of 6 or 7 — thereby harnessing the inspection process to procedures for rooting out "incompetent" teachers. In return, teachers see Woodhead as one-sided in his appraisal of teachers. As one mentioned, "He's doing the Government's dirty work", and stories abound (again impossible to verify) of his doctoring reports to make schools and teachers look bad. In this testy atmosphere, teachers play a defensive game: thinking that inspectors are looking for bad teaching, they try to teach by the book so as to avoid the dreaded 6s and 7s. All this is well-known to inspectors, of course; one Reggie complained that "teachers misunderstand the brief of OFSTED" as teacher-bashing and school-bashing, and this "misunderstanding" distorts their teaching and limits the value of the process in improving schools.

The end result is that most teachers experience inspection as enormously stressful. Of course, teachers vary in their response to inspection, and a substantial number consider inspection helpful in "sharpening up" their teaching; these individuals typically look forward to feedback. But many more are crushed by the experience — particularly new teachers, conscientious teachers, those who are insecure in their teaching and dread being found out, and those who are timid or introverted. These individuals routinely describe inspection as "the most stressful process I've ever been through"; "it's not as bad as bereavement or divorce, but it's third", commented another.[9] It is so stressful that many teachers are reluctant to acknowledge that it can have any value — and they may see the process as so illegitimate that they are unwilling to respond to the recommendations that come from it. Teachers and administrators alike describe a letdown after inspection week, a six-month period in which it's impossible to get teachers to do much of anything after the exertion of the inspection process. And so some question whether it can

[9] For much more detail about the extent and nature of teachers' distress, see many of the articles in the Cambridge Review of Education cited in footnote 4.

have any value, since it represents such an intrusion in the normal operation of a school, with a long period of preparation and a long period of recuperation following the inspection itself, it may take a year or more in the life of a school.

So, from the perspective of most (but not all) teachers, inspection is not a particularly supportive process. But the details that make it so stressful can be readily changed, as subsequent sections on self-initiated inspections and FE inspections illustrate. The problem is less with the idea of classroom observations as the basis of school improvement than with the specific way OFSTED and Chris Woodhead have implemented this process.

The Truncation of Information and Expertise

A remarkable feature of inspection is the amount of information and expertise about teaching that it generates. The inspectors themselves are typically highly experienced: many are former HMIs or LEA advisors who used to provide advice in specific curricular areas to local schools.[10] The process of inspecting many schools increases their expertise, as they are able to observe practices in a great many schools. Indeed, two Reggies on two different teams described inspection in much the same terms: "the inspection process is a gift", one said, while another called it "a privilege and a joy" because of the opportunity to observe a large number of schools.[11] While, unavoidably, a few inspectors are incompetent (and generate a large number of negative stories), the majority I observed are experienced, dedicated to education, highly informed, and therefore — when they have the time and inclination — quite effective in suggesting alternatives for teachers to consider.

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[10] The Conservative government has required LEAs to subcontract their staff development, breaking up LEA staff and providing a pool of individuals available for inspection teams. The subcontracting requirements have had devastating effects on the coherence and continuity of staff development; see Finkelstein and Grubb (1998).

[11] Teachers might be incredulous to hear inspection described in these terms; particularly in the first school, where there were many distraught and weeping teachers, it's hard to imagine that they considered inspection a gift to anyone.

Their advice is based on practices they have observed rather than just their own views of teaching; they are also able to provide recommendations about specific teaching problems that individual teachers experience since they can comment on the details of a particular lesson — rather than simply providing only general advice abstracted from the specific details of a particular school, class, and subject. The real promise of inspection, then, is that it can move between the specific and the general settings of education: inspectors observe specific classes and can provide advice tailored to those situations, while their wide familiarity with other schools enables them to understand how any one class fits into a much broader range of practices.

Unfortunately, an enormous amount of information collected in the inspection process is simply thrown away, and the tremendous expertise on an inspection team is made largely irrelevant. The truncation of information starts with each classroom observation: while some inspectors provide some feedback on the spot, this is limited by time schedules, by the overwhelming burden of paperwork, by the philosophies of certain teams, and by OFSTED policy which discourages such feedback. Then, when the results of each classroom observation are recorded, four aspects of the class (teaching, response, attainment, and progress) are reduced to numbers (one to seven again!) with a supporting paragraph of 100 - 200 words (the observation sheet provides about 1 1/2 inches of space for each category) — but the paragraphs are typically general, rather than referring to specific details; the immediacy of the classroom experience is lost forever.

Then, results are summarized for specific departments for the "star sheets" in a pressured Thursday afternoon meeting, causing further loss of information across all teachers in a department. The process of generating numbers for each department requires inspectors to provide some justification for their ratings, which they generally base on evidence from particular classrooms. In the rating session I observed, there was a tendency to start with a 4 (the mid-point of the Likert scale) and then demand evidence for any departure from 4, with 3's and 5's requiring

some evidence — "well, it might be 3-ish, but I'm not sure" — but 1's and 2's and 6's and 7's require a great deal more concrete evidence. Reportedly many inspectors are reluctant to give 6s and 7s, because of the enormous effects this can have on a teacher and school. (Indeed, some Reggies resigned rather than participate in the search for failing teachers and failing schools.) This procedure presses the final scores towards the middle and eliminates high and especially low scores, but it also throws away the rich information about what happened in specific classrooms.

The results of the star sheets are not given to the schools[12]; instead the results are summarized in a few written paragraphs. Any writing which goes to school personnel, as well as the draft reports and the published final reports, translate the numbers from the star sheets into bureaucratic language ("below average for this department", "well above average for schools of this type"), without any detail about the teaching practices observed or specific strengths and weaknesses. Many teachers and administrators refer to this as "OFSTED-speak" since it is so standardized and conveys so little information. Thus rich and generally informed classroom observations by experienced inspectors are converted into numbers with supporting paragraphs, summarized across teachers into yet other numbers, and reported back to the school in impersonal language. In the process, the information that would be most useful to teachers is lost unless an inspector has managed to have a quick conversation on the run.

In the process, the expertise of the inspectors themselves is wasted. Their increasing experience may enable them to carry out inspections more smoothly, to come more quickly to a summary judgement about a class or department, or to write a supporting paragraph more precisely; as one inspector mentioned, when I asked

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[12] The results of the "star sheets" are accumulated in a vast data base, the Education Information System, that OFSTED proudly considers a rich resource for research purposes. It would, of course, be wonderful to have such a data base describing many different dimensions of teaching based on observations; but the OFSTED data doesn't include any information about how individuals are teaching, and the numbers themselves almost surely suffer from restricted variation as inspectors tend to avoid very high and low ratings, and biased because inspectors often try to avoid 6s and 7s. In my view it would be foolish to use these data for research, except possibly to describe what OFSTED itself has done.

what difference her background made to her observations, "it helps me write the paragraph". However, the form in which information is reported from inspections limits what they can say. If they see systemic problems in a region, or in a particular curriculum area — for example, a lack of imaginative practice in technology that one inspector reported to me, or a general inability to educate handicapped students appropriately — there is no forum for their observations. If there are trends in the regions where they practice, for good or ill, they have no official way to record this information. The inspection process may be a "gift" to inspectors but — unlike the continuing exchanges in gift-giving societies (Hyde, 19xx) — the gift falls into a black hole, with no way it can continue to enrich the community.

The Effects of Inspection: Regulation versus School Improvement

The most important question is whether inspection can improve the quality of education. This is, of course, a complex issue because it is entangled with perception of the inspection process itself, and some participants are reluctant to acknowledge that it could help; one teacher complained that "you've pulled it out of me" when I finally got her to acknowledge some benefit from the process. But there have been a few relatively clear effects, and — more to the point — some negative consequences where changes in the inspection process could make it much more effective.

One consequence, often forgotten in the turmoil over the process itself, is that inspection has served to reinforce the National Curriculum. Because the precepts of the National Curriculum are the basis for observations, a school that departs from this standardized curriculum will fare badly in its inspections, and will therefore be subjected to various corrective pressures. At least, this is generally true; in practice inspectors have their own conceptions of what good teaching is and look for practices — for example, student initiation, genuine discussions, particular

approaches to problem-solving whether in theater or math classes — that are nowhere mentioned in the *Guidelines*. Inspectors often look for particular elements in specific subjects that they have taken from their experience and from their observations in many other schools — in addition to the National Curriculum itself.[13] But despite these departures from orthodoxy, in the main inspectors are required to judge teaching against the standards of the National Curriculum. Indeed, the four criteria by which each class is judged are not equally weighted: one inspector reported that attainment of national standards is the most important criteria, followed by progress ; the response of students — a category reflecting motivation, engagement, and interactions within the classroom — comes third, and teaching is last among equals. To the extent this is true,[14] the requirements of the National Curriculum are even more powerful.

Unfortunately, following the National Curriculum constrains the inspection process in obvious ways. For example, I observed an A-level math class for 17-year olds; A level classes are considered the "gold standard" of the British system, where selected students concentrate on three subjects (often related) in the last two years of secondary school, in preparation for further specialization at the college level. But this class was solving a perimeter problem ("if a field contains 10,000 square feet and is square, how many feet of fencing are required . . ."), which by American standards is an 8th or 9th grade activity; the teaching was extremely mediocre, with formulaic IRE questions and desultory responses. But the students did understand the lesson and made progress; the inspector admitted that in the pre-1993 inspection system he could have critiqued the low content level, the pedestrian teaching, and the

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[13] In the school where I was a guest of the inspection team, inspectors were forthright about what they were looking for; in another school where I observed at the invitation of the principal, inspectors were much more cautious about talking with me. But of course there have to be departures from the Guidelines and the National Curriculum, because most of the inspectors are experienced educators and therefore bring into the inspection process a lifetime of experiences that they cannot simply set aside.

[14] I've been unable to verify this statement, and it isn't clear precisely how such a weighting would be reflected. At the end of the day, however, the stress on performance levels throughout the British system is so powerful that a school with low performance levels — because of immigration, language backgrounds, student mobility, and other aspects of family backgrounds all too familiar from the U.S. experience — will get a low rating regardless of how inspired the teaching is.

reluctant student participation, but he couldn't find much fault according to the National Curriculum guidelines. It's difficult, then, for a highly constrained inspection process to be any better than the guidelines it follows.

Beyond its enforcement of the National Curriculum, the effects of inspection are widely debated. Even those teachers most resentful of inspection admitted that it had forced them to think more about their teaching and to complete the lesson plans they should have developed anyway; many got some constructive feedback, and a few teachers received a great deal and found the entire process worthwhile. But the difficult question, almost always posed in economic terms, is whether these benefits are worth the costs of the process itself, or whether improvements in teaching could be obtained without the stress, the attention to paperwork, and the inevitable letdown after inspection. Most teachers and administrators do admit, albeit grudgingly, that inspection has some benefits, but that they are not worth the costs. In this calculation, my own view is that the alternative inspection procedures that schools have created on their own, and the process in FE colleges, are modifications that generate greater improvements with much smaller costs overall — as I will argue in Sections III and IV. However, one problem with this economic formulation is that costs take different forms: the real costs of elementary-secondary inspection come in the forms of stress, unpaid work by teachers, and the lack of progress after inspection, none of which are monetized; the more careful and lengthy procedures developed for FE colleges undoubtedly cost more in monetary terms but much less in other intangible costs. For those concerned only with public budgets, therefore, the FE inspections may not look like they are worth the higher costs — but they certainly are from the perspective of instructors.

From the vantage of administrators and schools, still a different calculus about the effects of inspections is typical. Often, of course, inspections find flaws in schools that administrators and heads of departments have known about, and then the results of the inspection and the new attention of boards of governors help

reinforce the efforts of administrators to change. But when administrators disagree with the results of inspections, or when inspectors raise points about the quality of management itself, then a different kind of problem arises. Several managers reported that if administrators and boards of governors accept the legitimacy of the inspection process, then they are more likely to embrace its recommendations; but if the results are seen to be illegitimate then schools are much more likely to resist changes — not surprisingly. There are many different grounds for finding an inspection flawed: sometimes the Reggie is rigid and unfriendly, sometimes individual inspectors (particularly the lay inspector) are unobservant or ignorant about practice, sometimes inspection teams see what teachers consider atypical days.

The process by which a school comes to view an inspection as legitimate does not work the same in all schools. Those schools which are basically working well are likely to draw praise as well as criticism; but mediocre schools, or schools with high proportions of low-achieving students, are likely to find themselves with dismal ratings that teachers and administrators then reject. In contrast to the old inspection system, where HMIs were viewed almost with awe and widely thought to be concerned only with the well-being of students, there are many more ways to reject any negative results of inspection: educators can fault the qualifications of the inspection team, or the thoroughness of the inspection process, or the political motives underlying inspection — and can therefore reject the conclusions of an inspection. As a result there is general consensus that inspection works better as a mechanism of school improvement with good schools than with mediocre and failing schools (see also Hargreaves, 1995).

Certainly, if the purpose of inspection is to close failing schools, the process has itself been a failure. Between 1993 and 1996, only xxx of xxx schools were [complete]

As a mechanism of school improvement, therefore, inspections in elementary-secondary education haven't been particularly effective. They may

"sharpen up" some teaching, and provide some feedback to teachers who are particularly receptive, but that advice costs a great deal in terms of anxiety, perhaps pointless paperwork, and the inevitable post-inspection letdown. The results may help some schools improve, particularly when inspectors ratify what administrators already know, but they are less effective with precisely those schools that need the most help.

To be sure, official policy is that inspection is a mechanism of regulation, not advice and improvement. But calling inspection a mechanism of regulation rather than school improvement gives away the real potential of an observation-based system. Indeed, the most distressing aspect of the 1993 changes under OFSTED and Chris Woodhead is that a widely-respected (though unstandardized) system of inspection, providing widely-respected advice, was converted into a much-dreaded process with such checkered results. As I will argue in subsequent sections, the standardization of inspection need not have led in these directions since other systems of inspection have been much more successful.

The Focus of Inspection: The Teacher, the School, and the System

One of the most promising aspects of inspection is that it collects information both about individual practice — the activities of teachers in classrooms — and about a school's policies, through interviews with administrators .[15] In theory, this allows the inspection team to link the two — to understand the ways in which individual teaching results from school policies, rather than viewing teaching as individual and idiosyncratic (as is common in this country).

Indeed, many inspection teams appear to stress the institutional origins of good and bad teaching. In one team I observed, there was general consensus that

[15] However, there are no interviews with teachers except the head teacher of each department. Therefore the management's activities are viewed through the eyes of administrators, but not the eyes of teachers; it's possible, therefore, that the conception of what administrators in a school are doing is biased.

eliminating bad teachers is the responsibility of the school head and other administrators — that they should have a system in place to monitor the quality of teaching, to provide help to weak teachers, but then to begin the process of dismissing teachers ("It's difficult, but it can be done") if efforts at improvement fail to work. In the eyes of this team, an OFSTED inspection should not be the mechanism for dismissing incompetent teachers; indeed, this would be a sign of a system failing badly. Similarly, this particular school suffers from an awkward physical plant, which might be seen as beyond the control of school administrators; however, the inspection team faulted the head for not going to his Board of Governors for improvement and for failing to take certain steps to make better use of space — including steps that they had seen work successfully in other schools with poor facilities. In the same school there was general concern that career guidance was not being carefully coordinated — "things are hit and miss, and students miss out if their tutors are not interested" — rather than having systemic practices providing all students with consistent guidance. Thus the bulk of the inspection process was focused on individual classrooms and teachers, but the central concerns of the team were institutional and administrative.[16]

However, OFSTED has not been clear about this kind of institutional responsibility, and many of its activities have reinforced a view of teaching as individual and idiosyncratic. Woodhead's constant harping on incompetent teachers and his campaign to rid the schools of failing teachers reinforces the tendency to see poor teaching as an individual characteristic — rather than the fault of a system with relatively low pay, poor conditions in many urban schools, and professional strains caused by Woodhead and his fellow Conservative officials. OFSTED's requirement of certificates for outstanding teachers (with 1s and 2s) and

[16] This perspective almost surely varies among teams. Teams are thought to have distinctive personalities, often shaped by the Reggie, and an institutional versus individual perspective may be among them. Other teams are described as being "by the book" versus less formal, or interested in giving advice versus unapproachable. However, while teachers and administrators clearly prefer teams that provide more guidance, it's unclear how these "personalities" affect the choice of teams or the reports written.

failing teachers (with 6s and 7s) returns the focus to individuals, and requires inspection teams to focus more carefully on individual ratings than on institutional strengths and weaknesses.

Of course, a reconciliation is possible: surely we should admit that the improvement of teaching has certain institutional dimensions, but that these sometimes fail and that individual teachers should be dismissed. The strength of the inspection mechanism is that it can provide information necessary for both of these. It can identify where schools are failing to provide necessary support for teaching, and can document these patterns by systematic evidence from classrooms. It can also identify "outliers" where, for example, a department (or school) has strong teachers but with one of two exceptions who have failed to respond to attempts at improvement; in these cases the external authority of inspectors can add to the evidence internal to the school. But — as in the value of inspection as a mechanism of school improvement — the balance between the two matters a great deal to the success of either: if inspection is viewed principally as a form of teacher-bashing, then it may lose its legitimacy as a mechanism for either institutional improvement or individual dismissal.

In one other dimension, the inspection process in England has failed to take advantage of its potential. Inspection is only one mechanism of improving teaching, after all: teacher training, in-service education, administrator preparation, the National Curriculum itself, the structure of salaries and patterns of shortages (or unqualified teachers), the schedules and demands placed on teachers, and the overall morale of the teaching force are other factors influencing the quality of instruction. But the inspection mechanism doesn't provide any evidence about the effects of these alternative influences (or policy instruments), partly because it doesn't interview teachers and partly because it emphasizes the National Curriculum. If, for example, there are systematic problems in teaching that should be addressed in pre-service education, or a preponderance of "failing" teachers in

urban schools because shortages of trained teachers are covered by substitutes, or problems in salary scales or teaching conditions than cause the best teachers to leave, there is no way for the inspection process to cumulate this information across schools, The process of contracting out inspections to different teams means that — even though individual inspectors may accumulate tremendous experience — results are institutionally fragmented in a series of reports on individual schools.

In contrast, inspection was initially created in order to make recommendations to the Crown about schools, and in the days before 1993 its expertise and authority made it a respected voice in policy deliberations. But this aspect of the Inspectorate has changed, because of the inspection process itself as well the Conservative distrust of educators and the destruction of expertise among HMIs. The irony is that a system created to improve the quality of British education can no longer address the most pressing issues of the system.

The Inspection Team and "Role Strain"

Finally, what of the inspectors themselves? In England, there is very little concern with inspectors: teachers and administrators usually view them as agents of OFSTED, with a mixture of dread and hostility; there are many stories about their incompetence that circulate among teachers, the educational equivalent of urban legends, without any countervailing positive stories. OFSTED seems to view them merely as vendors carrying out contracts, no more special than fishmongers or parts suppliers, even though OFSTED often points to inspectors as responsible for outcomes. A great deal of national discussion seems to view inspectors merely as money-grubbers, getting rich off inspection contracts. The contrast with HMIs of the olden days, revered and respected, is stark.

Inspectors deserve much more sympathy than they have gotten, in my view. They are usually, in my limited contact with them, generally experienced

individuals, deeply committed to improving schools, who have been forced out of earlier positions (as HMIs, LEA staff, and department heads) by the relentless pressures of Conservative policy. They generally participate in inspection as a way of staying in education and continuing to contribute to the good of schools. While they have not sunk into poverty, the competitive pressures in contracting make it implausible that anyone could get rich through inspection; indeed, teams with retired individuals are said to have a competitive advantage because they can charge less than teams whose members still have children to support and mortgages to pay. They may not be as wise as the former HMIs, and there are indeed some among them who can inflict damage, though as a body of individuals they represent an expertise about teaching unmatched by anything in Britain or this country.

But they have an impossible task, and I detect signs of "role strain" that has not been widely recognized in England.[17] On the one hand, inspectors are committed to education; on the other, they work for an agency — OFSTED — which spends a great of energy in school- and teacher-bashing. They accumulate a great deal of information about teaching practices, but they are constrained to report it in Likert scales and paperwork that strip the life out of what they've seen. They want to improve teaching, but despite their experience that are unable to provide much direct feedback; for the short period they inhabit a school they spend their time as snoops and snitches, recording everything they see in 7-point Likert scales on their omnipresent clipboards and scaring all the teachers they come across. As a former LEA inspector noted about current inspectors, "There are lots of conflicted people around".

The strain of these incompatible roles emerges in small ways. In the work sessions I observed, there was a great deal of gallows humor, including many comments about the "bureaucracy" (OFSTED) and its requirements. In referring to a

[17] The problem of role strain arises particularly with social welfare workers, who often go into the profession because they want to help the poor and then find they are agents of a repressive and uncaring State; see, for example, ???.

bit of computer-based paperwork, one inspector noted that "if you cut off the OFSTED logo, the computer likes it much better". "Don't we all?", another replied. There were many complaints about the pace of work and the fatigue at the end of a stressful week, and complaints about a procedure that, at the end of the day, requires the enormously complex task of teaching to be summarized in a single number. The team was trying its best to act responsibly — to provide some accurate assessment of the school's strengths and weaknesses that might help it to improve, while still following the guidelines required by OFSTED — but these were difficult to carry out simultaneously.

On another team, the Reggie — the individual who considered inspection a "gift" of insight to her and her team — forthrightly acknowledged that the inspection process, her current life work, has been a failure. The purpose, in her view, was to give schools themselves insight into their strengths and weakness, to operate — like the improvement of teaching itself — by building on the strengths of individuals rather than disparaging their weaknesses. But despite the enormous promise of inspection, she admitted (to a complete stranger) that it had failed because the time demands were so severe and because teachers misunderstood the purpose as teacher-bashing rather than instructional improvement. Others admitted that the process worked under some conditions, particularly in schools that were already quite competent, but not in the schools most needing advice. These kinds of admissions must be quite rare, since it's hard for people to admit that their work is ineffective, and I confess that it's almost unbearable to hear well-intentioned educators confess their complicity in an ineffective and often destructive system. But the process has put them in an impossible position.

And what of the remaining HMIs, now employed by OFSTED? For the most part, they administer contracts — though a few of them carry out inspections of failing schools, or schools with low attendance or high rates of excluding students — and therefore still serve in their old roles. But the old Inspectorate has scattered to

the winds, no longer the repository of experience it once was. Some HMIs retired; some of them still carry out inspections in a new and constrained form; and some turned into bureaucrats.

And so the saddest story of the current inspection system in elementary-secondary education is that it has converted a process that provided substantial help to teachers, albeit in an unsystematic way, into one that thwarts such help, constrains the development of expertise, and imposes enormous costs in the process. Fortunately there are many other ways to carry out inspections.

III. Self-Initiated Inspections

One consequence of OFSTED inspections is that many schools have created their own inspection systems, to prepare their teachers for the official inspection.[18] Often, administrators visit classrooms, using the OFSTED procedure and requiring their teachers to complete the paperwork required by OFSTED. Sometimes they hire outsiders — particularly individuals who work for inspection teams, or members of LEA staff — to provide an outside view and some "inside" advice about how an inspection will take place. As a result, there is considerably more routine observation of classes, for the purposes of improving teaching, than takes place in American schools. Such efforts are generally focused on preparing for the inspection itself, and therefore end when the inspection is over.

However, in a few cases, schools (and some FE colleges) have set up their own permanent inspection systems.[19] One such school began its effort after an OFSTED

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[18] It's impossible to know how common this practice is, though members of LEA staff report that informal pre-inspection observations are quite common, for which they are often brought in.

[19] Again, the magnitude of this practice is unknown. The school I visited with its own inspection mechanism knew of one other school in its shire (county) which had done the same; this practice therefore appears to be quite rare. This school was one with a head who was particularly insistent in improving teaching: he had started classrooms observations before OFSTED began its process, and the school hired an administrator in charge of quality assurance whose job was to examine specific teaching issues (e.g., pupil tracking, different teaching styles, the quality of staff development) and improve each one. In the U.S., it's hard to imagine having an assistant principal for teaching improvement; the most likely use of such resources would be an administrator in charge of student discipline.

inspection: they first created an inspection system in which their own teachers and administrators, joined by members of the Board of Governors, carried out classroom observations with OFSTED's procedures. However, the school found that it was unable to judge standards with only internal observers. The next year, therefore, it hired an "outsider" — a member of the LEA staff who participated in inspections — too add to the inspection team along with the "insiders"; since then they have added an external inspector for each curriculum area.

While this inspection process follows OFSTED's guidelines, the atmosphere surrounding it is completely different. This system was not imposed on teachers, since the administration consulted with teachers on its design; "it will be positive and developmental", intended to provide support and encouragement, declared the administrator in charge of it. No individual scores were reported, eliminating the sense of trying to root out incompetent teachers; instead, the faculty as a whole examined scores for various groups of teachers (grades and curriculum areas) and proposed collectively how to improve them. Finally, while the OFSTED process is a snapshot taking place in a single week, the internal inspection process for a department takes places over several weeks, allowing observers to see teaching over a longer span of time. A serious flaw of OFSTED inspections — the maxim that "if we didn't see it, it didn't happen"— is obviated by the longer period of time. Teacher interviews are part of the process, and therefore teachers have the opportunity to explain to observers the special characteristics of their approach and their students; the resentment at being observed without being able to interpret their teaching to outsiders is thereby avoided.

Unless I was systematically fooled, the teachers in this school generally support the internal inspection process. Certainly there's some apprehension about being observed; but the process provides them with helpful comments on their teaching, both from their peers and from curriculum experts from outside the school, and it enables them to see the range of teaching within the school. There's

more discussion about teaching as a result, because there's more shared information. The head declared that teachers change when they participate in such an inspection system: because the OFSTED forms require justification for any particular rating, teachers begin looking more closely at the details of classroom interactions rather than simply reacting on the basis of their feelings about the *Gestalt* of the class, and thereby become more sensitive to the interactions in their own classrooms. Finally, the internal inspection process incorporates the school's Governors, making them aware of educational issues in a way that had not been possible before.

In this self-initiated inspection, one school has modified the OFSTED process in relatively small ways, but the results are quite different. The issues — the atmosphere and purposes surround the inspection process, the balance of insiders and outsiders, the period of time over which observations take place — all prove to be crucial to FE inspections as well.

IV. Inspections in FE Colleges

Inspections in FE colleges are also descended from the old HMI system, though they have developed in very different directions.[20] As OFSTED did, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) created a schedule for inspections and a manual to guide them (FEFC, 1993), in place of irregular inspections based on unknown guidelines of the "connoisseurship" approach.[21] Inspection also had a

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[20] One negative consequence of splitting elementary-secondary inspections from FE inspections is that there are no longer any individuals observing both secondary and postsecondary institutions, and therefore able to judge the transition between them in the way that pre-1993 HMIs could. There have been some efforts for OFSTED's and FEFC's Inspectorates to work with one another, particularly on issues of consistency where they may both have jurisdiction over a school. However, one senior inspector noted that OFSTED was difficult to work with because of their different approach to inspections: he considered FEFC to be more open, more flexible, providing much more feedback to instructors, and allowing colleges to participate more actively in designing the inspection.

[21] There's much less research about FE inspections than there is about elementary-secondary inspections, though Melia (1995), the chief inspector for FEFC, has written an informative article and Spours and Lucas (1996) include some observations. The Times Educational Supplement has a special section, "FE Focus", that is also valuable in following current developments. This section is based on

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regulatory purpose: in 1992 FE colleges were required to incorporate as autonomous institutions free of LEA control, allowing them local control of their finances and programs. Inspection was then instituted as a form of external regulation, to prevent autonomous institutions to water down the content of their programs.[22]

However, from the outset the FE inspection process was structured in subtly different ways. Self-assessment plays a more important role: each college must complete a self-assessment report prior to the formal inspection, in which they clarify their own views of their strengths and weaknesses, and formulate a process of improvement. As is true in elementary-secondary education, FE colleges often undertake their own inspections to prepare for the official inspection. (In one case, heads of colleges switched places, with each inspecting the other's college.) Indeed, this kind of internal inspection is almost required for the self-assessment procedures created by FEFC.

In addition, the inspection team is differently constituted. It is headed by a full-time inspector from the FEFC Office of the Inspectorate, who puts together the team in consultation with the college head; team members come from a pool of about 60 full-time inspectors and 600 part-time inspectors, who are usually instructors in FE colleges or employers in specific areas. The lead inspector therefore provides continuity among inspections because he (or she) is in charge of all inspections within a region — in contrast to the OFSTED process where each inspection is a separate event and contract.[23] The team then includes subject area specialists from other colleges and a "nominee" — an individual from the college

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visits to several colleges, interviews with FEFC personnel, FEFC reports, and discussions with several individuals who provide technical assistance to FE colleges. There's a great deal of uncertainty about what happens in FE colleges since — as is true for community colleges in the U.S. — there are not good mechanisms of information gathering.

[22] The other regulatory mechanism includes the various qualifications (or credentials) that students are trying to pass, including GCSE exams for 16-year olds, A-level exams to enter university, NVQs and GNVQs for those entering employment. These are in effect the FE college equivalents of the National Curriculum.

[23] FEFC has developed a matrix structure for its inspections: each of its senior inspectors is responsible both for a region and for a curriculum area. In the former capacity they have an overview of colleges in their region, and in the latter capacity they are responsible for collecting information from all the subject specialists and summarizing the findings in booklets.

being inspected. While there is only one such nominee on a team of perhaps 15, he or she plays a critical role: the nominee can interpret the school to the inspection team, and in turn serves to convey the conclusions of the team back to the college. Thus information from the inspection comes not only in the form of impersonal reports, but also in direct discussion with the nominee, the lead inspector, and subject specialists.

The inspection process takes place in a more extended fashion. The inspectors responsible for a particular curriculum area are likely to return to the college two or three times, observing classes at different points during a semester — avoiding the "snapshot" problem of OFSTED inspections.[24] After all the curriculum areas have been inspected, the "cross-college" inspection takes place, examining college-wide functions (career education, registration, extra-curricular activities, and the like) as well as administrative procedures intended to improve teaching; thus the cross-college inspection has all the information from the curriculum inspections available to it. Because subsequent visits can be scheduled after some information about teaching conditions has been developed, the inspection team can concentrate on areas of weakness, or areas that the college would like to improve; the press for coverage and observing every teacher that makes OFSTED inspections so pressed is thereby avoided. Of course, inspections teams may still miss some weak areas, as one nominee complained; in this particular case the administration was hoping that the inspection would strengthen its own initiatives in a particular department. But there are more opportunities to observe, over longer periods of time, and consultation with administrators and the nominee can help prevent such errors. And there is much less chance of committing the other kind of error — declaring a competent teacher to be deficient, based on a misinterpretation of a class or a too-short period of observation — because there are many more opportunities to discuss observations and interpretations.

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[24] During fall 1996 FEFC was discussing whether to replace this kind of "rolling" inspection (called the "drip-feed" method) with the two-week "snapshot", mimicking OFSTED's approach.

Much more clearly than OFSTED, FEFC has articulated a "corporate" view of inspections — that improving the quality of teaching is an institutional responsibility, not an individual issue. Particularly through the cross-college examination, inspectors evaluate institutional practices related to teaching much more consistently, and the recommendations of inspections are directed at college administrators rather than individual teachers. It helps that FEFC has avoided the strident teacher-bashing of Chris Woodhead and the constant references to incompetent and failing teachers; while FE inspections can certainly identify individuals in need of improvement or dismissal, the aura surrounding FE inspections is much less charged. Most FE personnel view the FEFC Inspectorate as supportive of colleges,[25] in contrast to the situation in elementary-secondary education where the Government is widely viewed as being hostile to the education establishment.

In addition, FE inspection is much more thorough in providing information to instructors and colleges. The role of the nominee is crucial to this process; in addition, the chief inspector discusses findings with the college head throughout the process. After an inspection is complete, the college prepares a plan of improvement, and the chief inspector continues to work with the administration as it carries out this plan, providing more continuity in advice and consultation that the OFSTED process allows. The expertise developed among inspectors is used in more consistent ways: subject areas specialists are available for consultation to other colleges, and the Inspectorate has published a series of booklets (e.g., *Engineering*, 1996, or *Humanities*, 1996) describing overall findings in particular curriculum areas and providing recommendations for good practice. The annual report of the Chief Inspector, Quality and Standards in Further Education in England, is also an

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[25] It's important to distinguish feelings toward the FEFC Inspectorate from feelings toward FEFC itself. FEFC has been responsible for establishing competition in postsecondary education, equalizing funding among FE colleges, and establishing national policies for what had previously been local institutions. All these responsibilities have caused a great deal of friction between FEFC and local colleges. Indeed, some observers have suggested that the lack of controversy around inspection has been due to the fact that there are so many other issues in conflict.

informative document, judicious and balanced in its identification of strengths and weaknesses. The FEFC seems to have learned from experience: one senior inspector noted that early reports were "terrible" — poorly justified and badly written — and the process changed in response.

Finally, the inspection process forces administrators to think about issues of teaching and learning. By contrast, many (though not all) community colleges in the United States are led by administrators who spend almost no time in the classroom, who are poorly informed about what instructors face and seem to be unsympathetic to the difficult teaching issues in community colleges; faculty refer to them as "bean counters", and the level of hostility toward them is dreadful to see (Grubb and Associates, 1999, Ch. 7). But administrators in England at least know more about what happens in classrooms. They may choose to be "bean counters", and the competition engendered by Conservative governments has definitely pushed them in this direction; but the inspection system at least provides them with the information necessary to improve the quality of instruction.

Of course, no one thinks that FE inspections are fun. There remain complaints about the vagueness of requirements, about the amount of documentation necessary, and about the tight timetable. However, on all of these dimensions FE inspections are a vast improvement over elementary-secondary inspections. Furthermore, FE administrators and instructors generally accept the need for improving the quality of teaching, and largely approve of the FE process. When inspection is carried out in ways that maintain the dignity of instructors and the integrity of institutions, and that maximize the advice back to instructors, then it need not generate the controversy and resistance typical in elementary-secondary education.

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V. Translating Inspection to the United States

One obvious lesson from England's experience is that the idea of inspection can be interpreted in many different ways, at very different scales. The specific composition of the inspection team, the balance of insiders and outsiders, the period of time over which an inspection takes place, and the ways information is reported back to instructors and administrators are procedural issues that can be endlessly varied. The atmosphere surrounding inspection, the balance of institutional versus individual conceptions of responsibility for teaching, and the balance between advice and improvement versus regulation are less tangible aspects of inspection that matter a great deal to its effectiveness. Individual schools or colleges can develop their own inspection mechanisms — just as a very few community colleges now have their own programs of observation (Grubb and Associates, 1999) — though such procedures would probably become more acceptable if larger numbers of institutions, in coalitions of reforming schools, or school districts, or entire states adopted inspection.

This may be a good moment to introduce the practice of inspection into the United States.[26] In the current reform movement, certain reforms — for example, those of the Coalition of Essential Schools, the effort to develop Accelerated Schools, and efforts to integrate academic and vocational education — depend for their power on changes in teaching, and inspection provides a mechanism to give teachers trying new approaches feedback on their efforts. Other reforms place great emphasis on teachers upgrading their skills continuously, such as the efforts to develop teacher academies and professional practice schools, and others envision

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[26] Some efforts are already underway. Tom Wilson has been working to incorporate classroom observations, or "school visits", into the procedures used by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Rhode Island, Illinois, and Chicago; David Green, a former HMI inspector, has worked with schools in Chicago on the School Change and Inquiry Program and in New York State on the School Quality Review Initiative, which uses external teams of reviewers much as inspection does; see also Olson (1994) for a description of the New York efforts. See also Wilson (1995), who reviews some other activities in the U.S.

communities of instructors engaged in more continuous and self-directed forms of staff development (e.g., Lieberman, 1996; McLaughlin and Darling-Hammond, 1996); for these reforms, inspection can provide both assistance in the process of change and information about whether change is taking place. Still other reforms, including some state efforts and certain nationwide initiatives like that of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, have developed standards or guidelines for different subjects; sympathetic observers could help teachers in their efforts to adopt such standards. In our observations in community colleges (Grubb and Associates, 1999), many instructors would welcome observations in order to move toward the ideal of community colleges as a "teaching institutions". Finally, there have been many proposals for external forms of accountability, through examination and assessment and "standards"; but without knowing what's happening in classrooms these are likely to remain weak methods of improving schools. The current moment is therefore conducive to practices like inspection, even though the idea has not been in general circulation.[27]

However, the English experience provides several warnings about how best to institute inspection. One is that any observation system requires a climate of trust, a sense that teachers, administrators, and policy-makers are joined in a common enterprise to improve schools. Where this trust does not exist — for example, where policy-makers are trying to impose an unwelcome agenda, as in English elementary-secondary education, or where teacher unions and administrators are antagonistic, or where personal relations within schools are antagonistic (cite) — then the inspection process itself may be undermined as teachers engage in defensive teaching, and any recommendations are likely to be undermined as teachers (and often administrators) see them as illegitimate. While inspection can be used either

[27] See also Little and Bird (1987), reporting on five schools selected for their instructional leadership. Most of the staff in these five schools believed in the value of classroom observations; however, in several of them observations were too infrequent, too short, and too uninformed by any sense of purpose to be valuable. Their conclusion — that observation must be organized in certain ways to be effective — is equivalent to my contention that the details of inspection matter a great deal to its results.

for school improvement or for accountability, the English experience suggests that it may be more effective when the emphasis is placed on improvement.

Second, inspection requires that there be some generally-accepted standard of what teaching should be. The model of "connoisseurship", although it may work well with certain individuals, is likely to be too unsystematic for widespread use, and the lack of any guidelines makes it difficult for teachers to know how they should improve their teaching. Therefore observation-based procedures are best viewed as *complementary* to other reforms taking place, and would be most effective in conjunction with other reforms that have clarified what practice should look like. And groups of schools engaged in the same kind of reform — Coalition schools, for example, or schools adopting career-oriented Academies and clusters, or even schools within a state like Kentucky that has adopted a consistent approach to reform — might also see themselves as part of a community of practice and therefore be open to inspection teams from other similar schools.

Finally, the details of inspection procedures matter a great deal to the quality of information generated by inspection. The participation of insiders as well as external inspectors, observation of classes over some period of time, and opportunities for teachers to discuss their teaching with inspectors are all critical to the success of inspection. And some way must be found to capitalize on the expertise developed by inspectors themselves, to make this available to teachers and administrators, for example through individual consultation during inspections, or through workshops and publications. Under these conditions inspection procedures generate a source of expertise around teaching, grounded in practice and experience, that can continue to improve schools and colleges.

Finally, any system of inspection or classroom observations requires some kind of institutional structure. Even if it a system is set up for a single school, it's important to establish expectations, regulate the conduct of the inspections themselves, and establish procedures for informing teachers and administrators

about their performance. In this country, it's tempting to suggest that classroom observations simply be added to the activities of accrediting agencies, which are already established to monitor the quality of schools and colleges. However, accreditation has largely focused on minimum standards, on facilities and health and safety issues and the adequacy of resources (Portner, 1997) , and it's difficult to imagine using these agencies for classroom observation and school improvement. There's really nothing in most states comparable to inspection, and so a new institutional structure might be necessary. But that is more opportunity than challenge, since it would enable a district, or state, or coalition of schools to devise its own observational process from the ground up.

Of course, it's difficult to borrow practices from other countries. The longevity of inspection in Great Britain has made the idea of external observers widely acceptable there, just as our history has led to the privacy of the classroom. But the secrecy of the classroom doesn't serve anyone well — certainly not students, nor advocates for reform, nor administrators who have little idea what is happening in their classrooms, nor teachers who often find themselves isolated and unsupported. If teaching and learning are to be central to our educational institutions, then inspection provides a way of learning what happens in the classroom and generating the expertise necessary for improvement.

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